

Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to Lieutenant Colonel Charles S. Kettles

July 18, 2016

Good morning, everybody. Please have a seat. Welcome to the White House. Of all the privileges of this office, none is greater than serving as the Commander in Chief of the finest military that the world has ever known. And of all the military decorations that our Nation can bestow, we have none higher than the Medal of Honor.

As many who know him have said, nobody deserves it more than Charles Kettles of Ypsilanti, Michigan. Many believe that, except for Chuck. *[Laughter]* As he says, this "seems like a hell of a fuss over something that happened 50 years ago." *[Laughter]*

Even now, all these years later, Chuck is still defined by the humility that shaped him as a soldier. At 86 years old, he still looks sharp as a tack in that uniform. I pointed out, he obviously has not gained any weight. *[Laughter]* And his life is as American as they come. He's the son of an immigrant. His father signed up to fly for the United States the day after Pearl Harbor and filled his five boys with a deep sense of duty to their country. For a time, he even served in the Army Reserve—for a time, even as he served in the Army Reserve, Chuck ran a Ford dealership with his brother. And to families who drove a new car off that lot, he's the salesman who helped put an American icon in their driveway.

To the aviation students at Eastern Michigan University, Chuck is the professor who taught them about the wonder of flight in the country that invented it. To the constituents he served as a rare Republican in his hometown's mostly Democratic city council—*[laughter]*—Chuck is the public servant who made sure that their voices were heard. And to Ann, his beautiful bride, who grew up literally as the girl next door, Chuck is a devoted husband. Next March they will celebrate their 40th anniversary. So happy early anniversary.

So in a lot of ways, Chuck Kettles is America. And to the dozens of American soldiers that he saved in Vietnam half a century ago, Chuck is the reason they lived and came home and had children and grandchildren, entire family trees made possible by the actions of this one man.

We are honored to be joined not only by Ann, but also 8 of Chuck and Ann's 10 children, and 3 of their grandchildren. It's the Kettles family reunion here in the White House. *[Laughter]* We're also honored to be joined by Chuck's brothers-in-arms from Vietnam and some of Chuck's newest comrades, members of the Medal of Honor Society.

May 15, 1967, started as a hot Monday morning. Soldiers from the 101st Airborne were battling hundreds of heavily armed North Vietnamese in a rural riverbed. Our men were outnumbered. They needed support fast, helicopters to get the wounded out and bring more soldiers into the fight. Chuck Kettles was a helo pilot. And just as he'd volunteered for Active Duty, on this morning he volunteered his Hueys, even though he knew the danger. They called this place "Chump Valley" for a reason: Above the riverbed rose a 1,500-foot-tall hill, and the enemy was dug into an extensive series of tunnels and bunkers, the ideal spot for an ambush.

But Chuck jumped into the cockpit and took off. Around 9 a.m., his company of Hueys approached the landing zone and looked down. They should have seen a stand of green trees; instead, they saw a solid wall of green enemy tracers coming right at them. None of them had ever seen fire that intense. Soldiers in the helos were hit and killed before they could even leap

off. But under withering fire, Chuck landed his chopper and kept it there, exposed, so the wounded could get on and so that he could fly them back to base.

A second time, Chuck went back into the valley. He dropped off more soldiers and supplies, picked up more wounded. Once more, machine-gun bullets and mortar rounds came screaming after them. As he took off a second time, rounds pierced the arm and leg of Chuck's door gunner, Roland Scheck. Chuck's Huey was hit. Fuel was pouring out as he flew away. But Chuck had wounded men aboard and decided to take his chances. He landed, found another helicopter, and flew Roland to the field hospital.

By now, it was near evening. Back in the riverbed, 44 American soldiers were still pinned down. The air was thick with gunpowder, smelled of burning metal. And then, they heard a faint sound, and as the Sun started to set, they saw something rise over the horizon: six American helicopters—as one of them said, "as beautiful as could be." For a third time, Chuck and his unit headed into that hell on Earth. Death or injury was all but certain, a fellow pilot said later, and "a lesser person would not return." Once again, the enemy unloaded everything they had on Chuck as he landed: small arms, automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades.

Soldiers ran to the helicopters. When Chuck was told all were accounted for, he took off. And then, midair, his radio told him something else: Eight men had not made it aboard. They had been providing cover for the others. Those eight soldiers had run for the choppers, but could only watch as they floated away. "We all figured we were done for," they said. Chuck came to the same conclusion. "If we left them for 10 minutes," he said, "they'd be POWs or dead."

A soldier who was there said, "That day, Major Kettles became our John Wayne." [Laughter] With all due respect to John Wayne—[laughter]—he couldn't do what Chuck Kettles did. He broke off from formation, took a steep, sharp, descending turn back toward the valley, this time with no aerial or artillery support, a lone helicopter heading back in. Chuck's Huey was the only target for the enemy to attack, and they did. Tracers lit up the sky once more. Chuck became—Chuck came in so hot that his chopper bounced for several hundred feet before coming to a stop. As soon as he landed, a mortar round shattered his windshield. Another hit the main rotor blade. Shrapnel tore through the cockpit and Chuck's chair. And still, those eight soldiers started to sprint to the Huey, running through the firestorm, chased by bullets.

Chuck's helo, now badly damaged, was carrying 13 souls and was 600 pounds over limit. It felt, he said, like flying a 2½-ton truck. [Laughter] He couldn't hover long enough to take off. But cool customer that he is, he says he saw his shattered windshield and thought, "That's pretty good air conditioning." [Laughter] The cabin filled with black smoke as Chuck hopped and skipped the helo across the ground to pick up enough speed to takeoff, like a jackrabbit, he said, bouncing across the riverbed.

The instant he got airborne, another mortar ripped into the tail, the Huey fishtailed violently, and a soldier was thrown out of the helicopter, hanging onto a skid as Chuck flew them to safety. Couldn't make this up. [Laughter] This is like a bad "Rambo" movie. [Laughter] Right? You're listening to this, you're—you can't believe it. [Laughter]

So the Army's warrior ethos is based on a simple principle: A soldier never leaves his comrades behind. Chuck Kettles honored that creed, not with a single act of heroism, but over and over and over. And because of that heroism, 44 American soldiers made it out that day—44. We are honored today to be joined by some of them: Chuck's door gunner who was hit,

Roland Scheck; the last soldier Chuck rescued that day, the one who figured he was done for, Dewey Smith; and a number of soldiers, our Vietnam veterans, who fought in that battle. Gentlemen, I would ask you to either stand if you can or wave so that we can thank you for your service.

Now, Chuck's heroism was recognized at the time by the Army's second highest award for gallantry, the Distinguished Service Cross. But Bill Vollano decided Chuck deserved an upgrade. Bill is a retired social worker who went to Chuck's house to interview him for a Veterans History Project sponsored by the local Rotary Club. Ann overheard the interview from the other room and reminded Chuck to tell Bill the story I've just told all of you. So this is something Chuck and I have in common: We do what our wives tell us to do. *[Laughter]* Chuck told the story, and with his trademark humility, finished it by saying it was "a piece of cake." *[Laughter]*

Bill, hearing the story, knew it was something more, and he started a 5-year mission, along with Chuck's son Mike, a retired Navy pilot, to award Chuck the Medal of Honor. Bill and Mike are here, as is Congresswoman Debbie Dingell who, along with her legendary husband, John Dingell, went above and beyond to pass a law to make sure that even all these years later, we could still fully recognize Chuck Kettles' heroism, as we do today. So we thank them for their outstanding efforts.

And that's one more reason this story is quintessentially American: looking out for one another, the belief that nobody should be left behind. This is—this shouldn't just be a creed for our soldiers, it should be a creed for all of us. This is a country that's never finished in its mission to improve, to do better, to learn from our history, to work to form a more perfect Union. And at a time when, let's face it, we've had a couple of tough weeks, for us to remember the goodness and decency of the American people, and the way that we can all look out for each other, even when times are tough, even when the odds are against us—what a wonderful inspiration. What a great gift for us to be able to celebrate something like this.

It might take time, but having failed to give our veterans who fought in Vietnam the full measure of thanks and respect that they had earned, we acknowledge that our failure to do so was a shame. We resolve that it will never happen again. It can take time, but old adversaries can find peace. Thanks to the leadership of so many Vietnam vets who had the courage to rebuild ties, I was able to go to Vietnam recently and see a people as enthusiastic about America as probably any place in the world, crowds lining the streets. And we were able to say that, on a whole lot of issues, Vietnam and the United States are now partners. Here at home, it might take time, but we have to remember everyone on our team, just like Chuck Kettles. Sometimes, we have to turn around and head back and help those who need a lift.

Chuck says the most gratifying part of this whole story is that Dewey's name and Roland's name and the names of the 42 other Americans he saved are not etched in the solemn, granite wall not far from here that memorializes the fallen in the Vietnam war. Instead, it will be Chuck Kettles's name forever etched on the walls that communities have built from Southern California to South Carolina in honor of those who have earned the Medal of Honor.

Of course, Chuck says all this attention is "a lot of hubbub, but I'll survive." *[Laughter]* Chuck, you've survived much worse than this ceremony. *[Laughter]* And on behalf of the American people, let me say that this hubbub is richly and roundly deserved. As the Military Aide prepares to read the citation, please join me in saluting this proud American soldier and veteran who reminds us all of the true meaning of service: Lieutenant Colonel Chuck Kettles.

[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Richard I. Lawlor, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Col. Andrew C. Steadman, USA, Army Aide to the President. Following the presentation of the medal, Maj. Gen. Paul K. Hurley, USA, Army Chief of Chaplains said a prayer.]

Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes the ceremony, but we have a reception. I hear the food here is pretty good. *[Laughter]* Let's give one more round of applause to Mr. Chuck Kettles.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:14 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ypsilanti, MI, resident William Vollano, a local Veterans History Project coordinator for the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center; and former Rep. John D. Dingell, Jr. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citation.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Medal of Honor :: Lt. Col. Charles S. Kettles, presentation.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Dingell, Deborah A.; Dingell, John D., Jr.; Kettles, Ann; Kettles, Charles S.; Kettles, Michael; Lawlor, Richard I.; Scheck, Roland; Smith, Dewey; Vollano, William.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Decorations, medals, and awards : Medal of Honor; Veterans : Service and dedication.

DCPD Number: DCPD201600473.